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To cite this Article: Kyttä, J., Frisk, D., & Kuusimäki, J. (2015) Finnish-Chinese cooperation development - International cooperation development project. AMK-lehti/UAS Journal, 3.

URL: https://arkisto.uasjournal.fi/uasjournal_2015-3/kytta.html

Finnish-Chinese cooperation development – International cooperation development project

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Introduction

Laurea UAS began a two-year CIMO project in January 2015. The purpose of the project is to improve strategic partnership activities and, by means of an international development project, the cooperation between universities in Finland and China.

Increasing cooperation activities in the global market environment not only benefits organisations that provide higher education but also aims at sharing knowledge and education in a more active manner. The goal is to improve cooperation between Finnish and Chinese companies and organisations in the future and to eliminate barriers that prevent international cooperation and partnerships between micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.

The project time line is divided into four parts over a two-year period. In Finland, Laurea's Uusimaa units P2P in Hyvinkää and Business Lab in Lohja serve as the coordinating bodies. Thus, they are responsible for project funding and matters related to operational planning. In accordance with the partnership activities, Häme University of Applied Sciences (HAMK) is the project partner for cooperation schools in Finland and China.

The participation of project partner institutions operating in China – Xiamen University Software School, Jiangxi Science and Technology Normal University and Beijing Technology and Business University – adds an international dimension to the project. There has not been similar cooperation between the Finnish and Chinese schools before this project. Thus we are hoping to accomplish lasting relationships between the schools and make it easier for companies to cooperate.

The universities operating in China and universities of applied sciences in Finland each have their own contact with which project parts are implemented and divided into "action points" for each period. Business Lab and P2P are in contact with the international coordinator responsible for Xiamen University Software School and with student, working together on actions that are specified for each period of the project and maintaining contact in weekly virtual meetings. HAMK is a project partner with Jiangxi Science and Technology Normal University and Beijing Technology and Business University, which operate in China. This paper concentrates in the cooperation between Laurea UAS and Xiamen University Software School.

Partnership activities in this project culminate in regional, inter-organisational and international differences between the educational lines and students. Thus, the students, organisations and the actual project all benefit from international cooperation and the viewpoints of experts and students from several different fields. Partnership activities and international cooperation makes it possible to utilise elements from China and Finland and their own unique market characteristics in project implementation and planning.

The beginning of the project

For Laurea, the first phase in the project, in January 2015 involved creating a foundation and strategy process for the different phases of the project. During this phase, Finnish students would travel to China and present the project targets and a description of the Finnish market situation. However, the most important aim of the trip was to establish a strong foundation for the strategy process. At the same time, the practical arrangements concerning communication and measures were agreed. The first major part of the project was then to build the cooperation process and develop the communication between students and faculty in these higher education institutions.

The P2P project team began its part of the project by creating a comprehensive analysis of the Finnish market. The purpose was to survey how factors affecting the market environment impact on market functioning, and to provide the project team operating in China with information about the operation and current state of the Finnish market.

The Business Lab project team started to develop a module that would ease international cooperation between Finnish and Chinese micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the future. This team began its work by collecting background information on the problems encountered by Finnish small and micro enterprises when cooperating with Chinese companies and organisations. The background research was completed in the form of benchmarking and qualitative interviews.

The background research made it possible to identify the biggest problem areas with regard to launching international cooperation. Many small companies cannot hire a consultant to handle or assist with starting international cooperation or trade relations. There is demand for products ordered from China, but the challenges to establishing trade relations can be huge for small and medium-sized or micro enterprises. The second challenge to launching cooperation between Chinese and Finnish companies is language and differences in virtual communications channels.

Trip to Xiamen, China

In March 2015, a project team of students and teachers from Laurea made a visit to Xiamen in China. During this trip, we learned more about our cooperation institute Xiamen University Software School and local culture. At Xiamen University, we met a group of Chinese students who will be involved in the project for the next two years. The P2P project team presented its analysis and showed the Chinese students how to produce a similar analysis for China. The analysis lays a foundation for the project by increasing understanding of the other culture and thus facilitating cooperation. The Business Lab project team presented a raw version of a module that it developed. At this stage of the project, we were aware of the challenges on the Finnish side, and during the trip we addressed the challenges that Chinese companies encounter when working with Finnish companies. The aim was to survey the challenges that Chinese companies face when initiating cooperation, and to find solutions to the challenges that Finnish companies have encountered.



Figure 1. Visit to Xiamen University Software School in March 2015 (Laurea's students and staff together with Xiamen University students and staff)

After returning to Finland, the teams continued to work on their own, meeting weekly in virtual format. The weekly meetings ensured that everyone moved in the same direction in terms of project implementation.

Lessons learned in this project

Working on an international project differs from project work with a Finnish team. In Finland, we are accustomed to a disciplined work style and are relatively reserved in terms of body language. The Chinese body language, customs and etiquette are very different than that of Finns. Another challenge was how to communicate and hold project meetings when the project team is separated by a few time zones and no one is operating in their native language.

In addition, cultural differences and technology factors have an impact on project work. For example, women in China have a very different position in the university world than their counterparts in Finland. Behavioural etiquette in lectures and meetings also differs significantly from prevailing practices in western countries. Community spirit in China is on a completely different level than in, for example, in Finland. People in China almost always consider their own job or educational institute to be the best in the field, which means that anyone seeking neutral feedback or a recommendation should begin by interviewing people from outside the organisation.

Image and reputation have great importance in China. This affects negotiations and brainstorming sessions held with the Chinese. During the spring, we learned that critical arguments or development proposals should be presented in a roundabout manner as questions rather than direct comments. This avoids situations in which a Chinese student is embarrassed by being the target of "criticism". The opportunity to work in an international team also provided valuable knowledge for the world of work. If we get the chance to work in a multicultural team later in our careers, we will be better prepared to handle the potential challenges.

Project work cannot be compared to traditional campus studies, because the learning that occurs in projects is completely different from lecture-style learning. The experiences are much more beneficial than theoretical studies. Project work has become more prevalent at workplaces, which makes participation in such a large project very useful. Studying in projects has developed our skills in social interaction, the English language and project work. Applying knowledge in practice and implementing a project brings a practical aspect to learning and teaches people how to deal with problems and situations that do not come up in lectures.

The future

This article depicts only the first part of the project that set the foundation for the future actions. During this project the students in Finnish project team will change but Chinese team stays the same for the whole two-year project. This change in personnel has a lot to do with the formation of the studies in both countries. Finnish students use project management system to manage the project and share the documents. The teachers for both Hyvinkää and Lohja students stay the same for the whole project. The first teams planned the process and now new students are taking those into action.

The goal for the second part of the project is to take these proposed plans to action. We are now contacting interested businesses in both countries and building the contacts for them. The idea is that by the coming spring, we would have the first actual contacts for the international projects. It is also in the plans that in the spring 2016 the students and faculty from Xiamen University Software School will come to Finland to meet the new Finnish students and also to get acquainted with Finnish culture and businesses connected with the project.